

Shimenawa



Have you ever noticed *Shimenawa*, twisted (or braided) rice straw ropes with hanging zigzag-shaped white papers in front of Shinto shrines or around Shinto objects of worship? They are traditionally considered to separate the secular from the divine and to have the power to ward off evil spirits and sickness.

They can vary in size and shape, from the ones several centimeters in diameter to Japan's biggest one at the Kagura (Shinto dancing) Hall in Izumo Grand Shinto Shrine, in Shimane, which has a circumference of 4 meters, length of 13 meters and weight of 5 tons! As for the shape, for some the width is same from edge to edge, while for some the center is wider than both ends like a turnip and, for others the width gradually narrows at one end, like a carrot.



• Origin

The origin of *shinemawa* dates far back to an ancient legend known as “Amano-iwato”. After Amaterasu-omikami, Goddess of the Sun, retreated into a cave, the whole world fell into darkness. The other gods met to think of a way to make her come out. The god Amanouzume-no-mikoto led a wild dance in front of the cave. Her dancing caused such a stir among the other gods that Amaterasu peeked out to see what all the noise was about. Then the god Tachikarao-no-mikoto opened the cave and made her come out. The cave was sealed by a rope so that Goddess of the Sun never hid herself. This is said to be the beginning of shimenawa.



• Shimenawa and Japanese mindset based on rice-planting

Rice is a Japanese staple, and as rainfall is indispensable for rice farming, praying for rain is one of the most important religious rituals.

The most commonly seen *shimenawa* is a braided rice straw with zigzag-shaped paper streamers called *shide* and tassels of straw hung alternately. A rice straw rope signifies clouds, the zigzag-shaped paper hanging from the rope implies flashes of lightning, and the strands of rice straw hanging from the rope represent rain. Our ancestors' genuine wish for a rich harvest is reflected in the design of this *shimenawa*.

Next time you visit Shinto shrines, please look out for *shimenawa*.